

A Guide for **Foster & Kinship Foster** **Families in Vermont**





Vermont Department for Children and Families Family Services Division

Mailing Address:

103 South Main Street, Osgood 3
Waterbury, VT 05671-2401

Website: <http://www.dcf.vt.gov/fsd>

Central Office Phone: (802) 769-6343

District Offices

Barre: (802) 479-4260

Bennington: (802) 442-8138

Brattleboro: (802) 257-2888

Burlington: (802) 863-7370

Hartford: (802) 295-8840

Middlebury: (802) 388-4660

Morrisville: (802) 888-4576

Newport: (802) 334-6723

Rutland: (802) 786-5817

Springfield: (802) 885-8900

St. Albans: (802) 527-7741

St. Johnsbury: (802) 748-8374

After Hours, Weekends & Holidays: 1-800-649-5285

The Emergency Services Program can help when district offices are closed.

Acknowledgments

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

JOINING THE TEAM

About this guide.....	5
The goal of state care.....	5
The Family Services Division of DCF.....	6

ACCEPTING A CHILD INTO YOUR HOME

Before you accept a child.....	7
When you get a call	7
When to say no	8
When to say maybe.....	8

WELCOMING A CHILD INTO YOUR HOME

Tips for a smooth transition.....	9
Understand what the child is going through.....	10
Help others in the family adjust.....	10
Special considerations for kinship foster parents.....	11

CARING FOR THE CHILD DAY-TO-DAY

Model and maintain family rules and boundaries.....	15
Use a positive approach to discipline.....	15
Understand your role in day-to-day life.....	17
Be an active member of the family's team.....	18
Nurture and support family connections.....	18
Participate in shared parenting meetings.....	19
Support family time.....	20

WORKING WITH DCF

Services to children and families.....	23
Staff and other professionals you may work with	24
The case planning process.....	25
What you can expect from DCF.....	26
What DCF expects from you.....	27
Who to call if you.....	28

UNDERSTANDING THE COURT PROCESS

Court hearings that may occur.....	29
Other things to know about court hearings.....	31
Courtroom guidelines.....	32

RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO YOU

Financial support.....	33
Training support.....	34
Other supports.....	35
Extended care for youth.....	36

THE ULTIMATE GOAL: PERMANENCE

Options for achieving permanence.....	37
A child's transition to another home.....	38
Some final words.....	38

JOINING THE TEAM

Welcome to the team! Whether you got your foster care license to care for a specific child you know, or for any child in need of care, you are now part of a team dedicated to protecting children, supporting families, and helping young people develop to their fullest potential.

When a child is placed in foster care, it means a Family Court judge has granted temporary legal custody of the child to the Department for Children and Families (DCF). Whenever we can do so safely, we keep children with their families and provide community-based, family-centered services and supports. Sometimes, however, temporary out-of-home care is needed.

That's where you come in. You provide a safe, stable, and nurturing home for a child, while we focus on the child's family. You also work as part of the "family's team" — alongside the parents, extended family members, social worker, and others — towards the child's safe return home (if that's the goal). Foster care is all about teamwork!

Effective teamwork can produce extraordinary results. It is, however, easier said than done. It is a process that takes hard work, patience, and good communication skills. It's also an opportunity — to learn, grow, and develop skills you can use in all parts of your life.

About this guide

This guide will help in your day-to-day life with the child in your care. It includes:

- An overview of the foster care system, court process, and resources available; and
- Practical tips to help you welcome a child into your home, care for the child, work with DCF, and more.

While most of the information in this guide is relevant to all foster parents, some sections are specifically intended for "kinship foster parents".

A kinship foster parent is an adult relative (e.g., grandparent, aunt, uncle, or sibling) licensed to care for a specific child. It can also be a non-relative adult who has a relationship or family-like bond with the child and/or family.

We strongly recommend that you read all parts of this guide.

The goal of state care

The ultimate goal of state care is to provide children and youth with safe, permanent homes — ideally with their parents. From a child's first day in state care, the social worker typically works towards two goals at the same time (called *concurrent planning*):

1. To return the child home to the parents; and
2. To help the child achieve permanence — preferably with extended family members or known connections — if he or she cannot safely return home.

This simply means that while we work towards the child's return home, we also make alternative plans in case that doesn't happen. This way, we can achieve a timely outcome that respects the child's need for stability. Living in uncertainty and moving between different living situations can be extremely disruptive to a child's development.

A strong partnership between foster parents and the Department for Children and Families is critical to the safety and well-being of children in state care. This partnership works best when it's based on mutual respect, excellent communication, and an understanding of each other's role.

The Family Services Division of DCF

The Family Services Division (FSD) is responsible for making sure the needs of children in state care are met and planning for their future. Our work is guided by the *Family Services Practice Model*, which describes what we want to accomplish with the children, youth and families we serve and how we perform that work. The practice model spells out the:

1. Core values we bring to our work;
2. Principles that guide us;
3. Practices that define the professional work of our agency; and
4. Processes we use to get the work done effectively and respectfully.

The core values we bring to our work:

- All children have the right to be safe.
- All families have both risk and safety factors.
- Everyone is capable of growth and change — with support and adequate resources.
- Engaged relationships hold the promise for sustained change.
- Valuing a family's expertise enhances our work together.
- Separating children from their families is traumatic and should be seen as a last resort.
- Early engagement of the larger family network is key to success.
- Responsibility should be shared and use of authority limited.
- Each family's cultural, ethnic, and spiritual diversity deserves respect.

The principles that guide our work:

- Safety - children are first and foremost protected from abuse and neglect.
- Permanence - children have enduring relationships that sustain them throughout their lives.
- Well-Being - Children are successful in family, school, and community.
- Law Abidance - youth are free from delinquent behavior.
- Learning Culture - staff are supported, valued, and receive ongoing training.

You can read the complete Practice Model on the Family Services section of the DCF website:
http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/pdf/fsd/FSD_Practice_Model.pdf

ACCEPTING A CHILD INTO YOUR HOME

Before you accept a child

Before you accept a child into your home, you need to:

1. Assess your family's strengths and limitations;
2. Decide what special needs and behaviors you can handle; and
3. Decide the age and gender of children you prefer to foster.

How soon you may be asked to take a child into your home depends on how flexible you are in terms of the age, gender, and special needs of the children you will accept. Keep in mind that the greatest need is for teens, sibling groups, and younger children with special needs. Your wait may be longer if you specify, for example, that you only want to foster children under the age of three.

If you have not received a call in awhile, don't assume your help is not wanted. It is just a matter of waiting for a child who is a good match for your family.

When you get a call

When you get a call about a child, the resource coordinator or social worker will share as much background information as is known at the time. It's important to ask questions to help you decide whether this is a good match for your family.

Questions you may want to ask when you get a call about a child

- Why does the child need placement?
- What are the child's strengths and challenges?
- Does the child's family pose any risks to our family?
- Are there any restrictions on the child's contact with friends, family, relatives or others?
- What do the child and family understand about the reason for placement?
- What is the child and family's current situation? Past history?
- What are the child's medical and educational needs?
- How long is the child expected to stay?
- What is the case plan goal? May I get a copy of the most recent case plan?
- When, where, and how often will the child have visits with family members (called *family time*)? What role will our family play?
- Are there any court orders in effect regarding parent-child contact?

- What is the child's religion? Does he or she attend religious ceremonies? If so, where?
- Is the child in school? If so, what school and grade is the child in? Is he or she on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)? Does he or she have an educational surrogate? If the child is not in school, does he or she go to childcare?
- What transportation is required to meet the child's needs (e.g., transportation to childcare or school, doctors, therapists, court, and visitation)?
- Does the child/family participate in any ethnic or cultural practices?

Take some time to think about the request and talk to your family. Tell the social worker or resource coordinator you will call back shortly, after you have had a chance to think about it.

When to say no

You need to carefully weigh all the factors when deciding whether to accept a child into your home. Only say yes if you think it will work.

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO SAY NO. Saying "NO" upfront will protect you and the child from a lot of pain and guilt later on. Don't feel pressured into situations that make you uncomfortable or you feel will not work. Some foster parents fear that if they say no, they will not be called again. That is not the case. The ability to say no is one of the most important skills you can have as a foster parent.

Some effective ways of saying no include:

- I don't think this is a good match.
- I am concerned because...
- Now is not a good time for us; please call again in a couple of weeks.
- I am not sure we are ready for this type of situation.
- I have some safety concerns. Adding this child will not work for other family members.
- I am concerned about the impact on other children in our home. I don't want to mix boys with girls or teens with younger children.

When to say maybe

There may be times when you say "maybe". You may, for example:

- Want more information before you make a decision. In non-emergency situations, you may be able to talk to the current caregiver to learn more about the child, how you can successfully meet the child's needs, and how to transition the child into your home.
- Not be able to take the child on the day you are called because of other obligations, but would consider having the child come to your home in a few days.

Discuss your questions and concerns with the resource coordinator or social worker.

WELCOMING A CHILD INTO YOUR HOME

You have agreed to provide care for a child in need. *So now what? Where do you begin?*

A good place to start is by making sure you have some standard items on hand for the child to use (e.g., toothbrush, hairbrush/comb, soap, bath towel, night light, rubber sheets, oversized t-shirt for sleeping, a few toys, craft supplies).

Below are some tips for making the child's transition into your home as smooth as possible.

Tips for a smooth transition

- Ask the social worker for a completed placement checklist, completed medical authorization form, and the child's Medicaid card or number.
- Remember, everything will be new to the child: new people, new space, new routines and rules, new food, and possibly even a new school.
- Welcome the child quietly. While you may be excited, the child is likely scared and confused. Settle down to a regular routine as quickly as possible.
- Give the child a tour of the house and identify their personal spaces (e.g., where they will sleep, where they can store personal belongings).
- Explain your house rules. It may be helpful to make a list of the three or four most important rules and share others as you go along. Keep them positive and simple.
- Remember, the child may be used to different routines and ways of doing things.
- Let the child know how she/he should address you. Many foster parents are comfortable using their first names. It is not appropriate to suggest the child call you "Mom" or "Dad". The social worker can help you decide what's best.
- Do not discard the child's belongings brought from home. Familiar possessions & smells will be a comfort to the child/youth.
- Respect the child's loyalty to his or her family. Expect the child to have mixed feelings about what has happened. Do not speak negatively about the child's parents.
- Ask about his or her family's way of doing things and, to the extent possible, incorporate those routines into your family's routines.
- Don't have a house full of friends or relatives over the first few days. It may be overwhelming for the child.
- Give the child time to adjust. This is a time of great emotional stress, more than the child may show. Expect occasional problems, but try to keep them in perspective. Do not emphasize small problems or minimize serious ones.
- Remember that you are not alone. Keep the child's social worker and other team members informed. If you need support, contact the resource coordinator. He or she can provide support and connect you with other foster parents in your area.

Understand what the child is going through

Don't be disappointed if the child doesn't respond to you immediately. It will take some time for everyone to adjust to the changes and for relationships to form.

Staying in a different place can be difficult for anyone, even in the best of circumstances. The child has been separated from his or her home, family, and neighborhood, likely under traumatic circumstances. In addition to feeling like an outsider in your home, the child may experience an overwhelming sense of grief and loss and may feel guilty about what has happened. At the same time, the child may feel relieved and thankful to be safe.

The first few weeks can be a confusing time for everyone. The child will likely have a wide range of emotions that even she/he doesn't understand, including anger, despair, fear, guilt, shame, helplessness, and relief. Initially, the child may be quite well behaved. This is commonly referred to as the "honeymoon period". This is a good time to work on establishing a positive relationship while sharing some of your expectations and rules.

As the child begins to relax and feel more comfortable in your home, his or her behaviors may become more challenging. The child will test the limits you have set and your commitment to him/her. It is common for children who have experienced abuse/ neglect and been separated from family to show their pain by withdrawing or acting out. This is to be expected and is not a reflection on you.

There are people who can help you understand these behaviors and how best to respond. Let the social worker and other team members know what is happening. **Ask for help early on.**

Help others in the family adjust

Other members of your household will also be experiencing change. In addition to sharing space and time, they are giving up a certain level of privacy. It is important to acknowledge this and have regular conversations. It is common for other children to become jealous or resentful of the new child in your home. Some children may experience changes in their family position and may no longer be the oldest, youngest, or only child.

Your relationship with your partner may change as well. It's important to maintain open communication and have a common approach to problem solving. As you focus on caring for a child who may have challenging behaviors and helping other children in the home to adjust, you might have less time for each other and for yourself. It's important to carve out time to connect with each other and have fun. Maintaining a strong relationship is important.

While the next section is specifically for kinship foster parents, we recommend that all foster parents read it. Some of the issues discussed may also be relevant to non-kinship foster parents.

Special considerations for kinship foster parents

While caring for a relative child is similar to caring for any child in foster care, there are a few differences. Kinship foster parents probably have an ongoing relationship with the child, the parents, and other family members and are often new to DCF and unfamiliar with the child welfare system. Because of these differences, kinship foster parents face some challenges unique to relatives caring for children in foster care.

Challenge #1: Being inside the crisis

As family members, kinship foster parents may feel caught in the crisis that brought the child into state custody. A long chain of events in the child's family may have come to a head, things may seem to be happening quickly, emotions may be high, and it may seem that DCF is acting on its own.

Challenge #2: Redefining roles & boundaries

Longstanding roles and boundaries in your family will change when the child comes to live with you and you take on the role of parent. You may go:

- From friend or equal to authority figure
Is one of the parents a close friend or relative? These relationships imply equality, with neither person having control or authority over the other person's life. Once you become a kinship foster parent, you will make decisions normally made by the parents. This will complicate your relationship with the parents and may be a difficult adjustment for the child to make.
- From bystander to responsible decision maker
Relatives do not always have close relationships. You might only see the child and parents at family get-togethers or may not have seen them in years. You may go from playing a minor or non-existent role in the child's life to playing a major one. Not everyone will be comfortable with this shift.
- From non-competitor to competitor
Even if it is not your intention, you may find yourself competing with the parents and other family members for the child's affection and authority.
- From grandparent, aunt, or cousin to "parent"
Being a relative is very different from being a parent. Relatives don't normally discipline children or provide for essential needs. Often, they do fun things with the child. Respect is assumed. When a relative takes on the role of parent, it can be a hard shift for both the relative and child to make.
- From ally to enemy
Kinship foster parents often find themselves in the difficult position of being between their families and DCF. Once the department intervenes, DCF is often seen as the "enemy". When you become involved as the child's caregiver, the parents and other family members may see you as being on DCF's side. You might be insulted by, or even isolated from, some family members.

At the same time, people outside of your family may perceive you to be on your family's side. They might, for example:

- Question your judgment about the child's needs.
- Wonder whether you might minimize the severity of what happened to the child because of your relationship with the child's family.
- Worry that you have the same unsafe behaviors as the child's parents, since you are family.
- Feel that you are biased towards or against one parent.

It may seem that you constantly have to prove that you have the child's best interests at heart. Below are some tips for managing this delicate balancing act.

- Focus on the child's best interests.
It's all about the child. He/she needs a safe place to live while in DCF custody, where his or her emotional, medical, physical, and educational needs will be met.
- Recognize that strong feelings are normal.
It's normal for parents to be angry and confused when they are separated from their children. Understand that these reactions are normal, even if they are directed at you.
- Learn what the law requires DCF to do to keep children safe.
Understanding what our legal responsibilities are will help you better understand why we do what we do and what we need from you. Your role is to provide day-to-day care for the child, while ours is to work with the parents.
- Be aware of your own feelings and opinions.
How do you feel about the child being in DCF custody? Do you believe the abuse happened? Recognize that it will be difficult for you to work with DCF if you have a different opinion about what led to our involvement. It might help to reach out to other kinship foster parents. Vermont Kin as Parents can help! (See back cover).

Challenge #3: Understanding your relative child

Depending on how well you know the child, you might experience some challenging moments as you settle into your new routines together. Keep these things in mind:

- The child will see you as he or she knows you.
When the child first moves in, you will still be Uncle, Auntie, or Grandma. The child will respond to you in old ways and may not fully understand your new role as "parent". It can be frustrating when it takes a while for the child to take you seriously. Make sure the child understands your expectations and rules and how much you care. This is especially important with teens who are naturally inclined to test authority. Try to strike a balance by being nurturing and firm. Expect the new situation to take some time to become comfortable.

- Treat the child as a family member, not a guest.
It's natural for new caregivers to try to "make up" for everything that has happened to a child in their care. It's tempting to buy them extra clothes and toys or to look the other way when they do inappropriate things. Treating them like everyone else can help them feel like they belong. At the same time, however, be sure to acknowledge the pain and struggle they are going through. It's also a good idea to give the child some responsibility.
- Expect the child to be loyal and attached to his or her parents.
Depending on his or her life experiences, the child may be very attached to his or her parents. He or she may even feel the need to reject and/or disobey you to prove it. You can acknowledge his or her love for the parents while being clear that certain events in the past were not okay.
- The child will be used to different rules, expectations, and rewards.
It will take the child time to get used to the way your family does things, especially if the child has experienced little or no structure. Be clear about your expectations. Write them down if necessary. Be patient!
- Expect challenging behaviors.
Children who come from abusive or neglectful situations often show their pain by withdrawing or acting out. Depression is common. If the child withdraws or displays aggressive behaviors, seek guidance from the child's social worker and other professionals in your community.
- Expect things to be more difficult around family time and court hearings.
Visiting with parents and seeing them in court can be confusing for children. While children are usually happy to see their parents, it can also bring up strong emotions (e.g., pain, anger, and sadness). Many children lose ground after family time and acting out is common. Recognize why the child is feeling this way and help the child express his or her feelings. The disruption will pass. Plan for these times and make sure you have extra support if you need it.
- Be particularly aware if the child has been sexually abused.
If the child has been sexually abused, you may need to adjust your family's habits around personal privacy. Before the child moves into your home, ask for advice about how to keep all the children in your home safe. Work with your team to put appropriate supports in place. Children who have been sexually abused sometimes act out in inappropriate ways. If this happens, make it clear that while the behavior is not acceptable, the child is still loved and valued. If the child discloses an incident of sexual abuse to you, report it to the social worker immediately. Do not investigate.

Tips to help you manage

- Know your responsibilities and limits and stick to them;
- Seek help from the “system” (e.g., child’s social worker, resource coordinator, and community service providers);
- When conflicts arise, look for “win-win” solutions;
- Give it time; be patient;
- Set simple goals, work towards them, and celebrate small successes;
- Use the child’s case plan for guidance; and
- Find allies and resources from both sides of the child’s family (see the exercise below).

Identify allies and resources within the family

Get a large piece of paper and list members on both sides of the child’s family. Try to list everyone. Ask other relatives for information if you need to. Include people important to the child and his or her parents even if they are not related. Leave space around each person’s name for notes.

Ask the following questions about each person.

1. How do I see this person (e.g. responsible, good, trustworthy, or dangerous)?
2. How does the child see this person? How do the parents see this person?

Put a question mark next to those people you don’t know enough about and try to find out more about them later. If the descriptions of an individual differ significantly, ask yourself why you, the child, or the parents feel differently about this person. What does it tell you: *Will limits need to be set in the relationships between the child and any of these individuals? Do any of these relationships pose a risk to the child or to your family?*

Refer to the family tree whenever you are looking for someone to:

- Care for the child when you need a break or take the child for an occasional outing;
- Help you advocate on behalf of the child with the agency or school; and
- Help you understand and work with the parents and/or child.

CARING FOR THE CHILD DAY-TO-DAY

Model and maintain family rules and boundaries

- Think about the rules that are important to your family and share them with the child.
- Have a few main family rules and be prepared to negotiate on others.
- Some decisions will require input from the child's social worker or parents. A child in your care may not always be allowed to do the same things your child does—for legal, policy or safety reasons.

Use a positive approach to discipline

Children learn best from a problem-solving approach to discipline, with positive reinforcement for steps in the right direction. They need boundaries and limits so they can grow and learn in safety.

*To discipline
really means
to teach.*

Tips for a positive approach to discipline

- Be clear and direct about your expectations.
- Appreciate improvements. Let a child know that you notice and appreciate his or her efforts to correct behavior. Acknowledge and praise desirable behaviors.
- Help change unacceptable behavior by changing the environment. For example: if a child is bored or restless, set up constructive activities (e.g., craft projects, games);
- Prepare children for transitions. For example: "We're leaving in 10 minutes; let's put these toys away and get ready".
- Keep the child's age and developmental stage in mind. Try not to ask too much or too little of a child. Learning about child development stages can help keep expectations realistic.
- Avoid asking younger children questions that encourage a "no" answer. Instead of asking, "Do you want to get dressed for school?", say, "It's time to get dressed for school." Provide more than one acceptable choice (e.g., do you want to wear the red or green shirt today?).
- Children need to know what they can do, not just what they can't. Offer alternatives. For example: Go outside if you want to play ball. Or stay inside and do something else. Choices help children become more responsible for their actions.
- Remember that rules can be bent for special occasions. If a special TV show is on or there is a visitor, the bedtime hour can, sometimes, be extended.
- Give the child some control. As children get older, they need more flexibility. "You can do your homework whenever you want to, as long as it's done before you watch TV."
- Encourage children to help solve problems. They often come up with excellent solutions. If not, offer possible solutions and let the child help select from them. It's easier for children to comply with a decision if they helped make it.
- Provide natural or logical consequences. Let the child help choose the consequences.
- Teach and demonstrate better approaches for the child to get what he or she wants.

- Count to three and be clear about what will happen when you reach three (e.g., you will get a time out or lose a privilege). Ignore some behaviors as long as the child is not hurting him or herself, others, or property. This does not mean you approve of the behavior.
- Give short time outs. For children under 12, one minute per year of age is a good measure. It's best for children to have "time out" in the same room with you, so they don't feel separated or alone.

Punishment not allowed with children in foster care

- Spanking;
- Any physical punishment (e.g., standing in a corner facing the wall, standing on one leg, or putting soap in a child's mouth);
- Repetitive tasks such as writing lines 100 times; and
- Locking a child in his or her room or out of the house.

To punish means to penalize for doing something wrong.

For more information, read the section on discipline in the Licensing Regulations for Foster Care (*regulations 323 to 328*). Ask the social worker or resource coordinator for a copy.

Ensuring safe sleep environments for infants

To help ensure the safety of all infants in state care, please follow the tips below when caring for an infant. If an infant has a specific health concern that prevents you from following any of these recommendations, please review the guidelines with the baby's doctor.

Tip 1 - Place the infant on his/her back for every sleep until age 1.

Tip 2 - Always place the infant to sleep on a firm surface, in a safety-approved crib, with a firm mattress and fitted sheet.

Tip 3 - Do not fall asleep in bed or on a couch or recliner with a baby.

Tip 4 - Make sure there are no stuffed animals or soft objects in the crib. Do not use crib bumpers or loose bedding.

Tip 5 - There should be no smoking in the home, car, or any area where the baby will be exposed to tobacco smoke. If you need help quitting, call 1-800-QUIT-NOW, go to VTQuitNetwork.org, or talk to your doctor.

Tip 6 - Use caution with alcohol or other drugs that may impair your ability to safely care for a baby.

Tip 7 - Try a pacifier at nap and bedtime to calm the baby.

Tip 8 - Avoid overheating, over-bundling, and any loose clothing (bibs, hats, scarves). Place the baby in footed pajamas with a light cover tucked at the bottom and sides of crib, coming no higher than armpit level.

Tip 9 - Never use devices that claim to reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS.) For example: wedges, positioners, or special sleep surfaces making a claim to reduce the risk of SIDS.

Tip 10 - Tell others who care for the baby, such as respite providers, about safe sleep.

These tips were developed by:

Vermont Department of Health
1-800-649-4357 • www.healthvermont.gov

Understand your role in day-to-day life

As the child's foster parent, you will be involved in every aspect of his or her daily life. Below is some information about what may be involved.

Education

Numerous studies have confirmed that youth in foster care are negatively impacted by frequent school changes. Disruptions in school placement can decrease academic performance and increase the likelihood of truancy and "dropping out" of high school. This contributes to higher than average rates of homelessness, criminality, drug abuse, and unemployment among young people who were in foster care. That's why we make educational stability a priority for every child in state care.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Department of Education and the Family Services Division allows students to remain in their schools even when placed out of their school districts. The social worker works with the family's team to determine whether the child should remain in his or her school at the time of placement. The child should not switch schools unless they determine it is in the child's best interest. This means that you may be asked to transport the child in your care to his or her original school, which may include transporting the child for extra curricular activities and maintaining close connections to local people who are important to the child. Mileage reimbursement is available.

Foster parents attend special events and participate in meetings at school. Some children who need special educational services are assigned an "educational surrogate parent" (a trained person who represents the child at meetings, requests evaluations, and develops and monitors special education plans). Training is required to become an educational surrogate; if you are interested, please tell your social worker or resource coordinator.

Transportation

You will routinely provide or arrange transportation for the child — to go to school, afterschool activities, doctor's appointments, childcare, family time, and court hearings. Transportation may be challenging for you; work with your team to resolve any problems.

Medical and dental care

You may arrange for the child's routine health and dental care and immediate medical treatment in case of illness, accident, or emergency. If possible, the child should remain under the care of the same physician and dentist he or she has been seeing. If appropriate, the child's parents should remain involved in his or her medical care.

It is your responsibility to keep the social worker and family (as appropriate) informed about health concerns. The social worker must give permission for anesthesia, surgery, and psychiatric services. After hours, call the Emergency Services Program (ESP) at 1-800-649-5285 for permission.

In an emergency, seek medical treatment first and then notify DCF. During regular business hours, call the district office. After hours, call ESP.

Religion

You are expected to respect and support the cultural and spiritual values of the children in your home. They should be given opportunities to attend services, celebrations, and other events to promote their cultural and spiritual growth. They have the right not to participate in religious ceremonies or other cultural traditions if they choose not to or if the parents do not want them to. The social worker and family can help you find resources when there are differences in spiritual or cultural customs.

Be an active member of the family's team

As a foster parent, you are part of a “team” that works together for the sake of the child and family. Members of the team could include:

- Family Services social worker;
- Parent(s);
- Extended family members and others important to the child/parents;
- Foster parents;
- Respite provider(s);
- A counselor or psychotherapist;
- Guardian ad Litem;
- School staff or childcare provider;
- Youth development coordinator for older children; and
- The child if he or she is able to participate (most adolescents and older children do attend).

Meeting as a team helps ensure you are all aware of the main issues and are working together to resolve them. It allows all voices to be heard, including the voices of the children and parents. Teams develop case plans together, make collaborative decisions to help support the child and family, and provide ongoing assessment.

Nurture and support family connections

Maintaining family connections is essential for children in foster care. Regardless of the type or level of abuse and neglect, the child still loves and is usually attached to his/ her parents and other family members. To support the child's family connections, you may participate in a “shared parenting meeting” and help facilitate “family time”.

- *A Shared Parenting Meeting* is convened jointly by the social worker and family time coach to bring together parents, foster parents, and other family members as appropriate, as well as the child in some instances.
- *Family Time* is scheduled contact between the child and his/her parent(s). It is one of the primary tools social workers use to help children cope with feelings of separation and loss associated with out-of-home placement.

Foster parents are essential to maintaining connections between children in foster care and the people important to them. Below are some ideas of how you can support these relationships. Be sure to discuss them with the social worker to make sure they are appropriate and in accordance with the case plan.

- Support family time, phone calls, and letters;
- Be a formal or informal mentor to the child's parents;
- Encourage family participation in decision-making; seek their input or help with parenting issues;
- Keep routines, traditions, and rules as similar as possible;
- Get pictures of the family for the child;
- Have the child draw pictures or create artwork for the family;
- Take the child to visit his/her community, church or school;
- Make sure possessions given to the child by his/her family are respected and kept;
- Reassure the child that the family cares for him/her despite the difficulties the family has meeting the child's needs;
- Be courteous and respectful to the child's family; don't talk negatively to or about them;
- Don't be judgmental; and
- With the social worker's permission, include family in celebrations, school and community events, etc.

Participate in shared parenting meetings

A shared parenting meeting is convened jointly by the social worker and the family time coach to bring together the parents, foster parents and sometimes the child/or youth and other family members as appropriate. This is the first opportunity for all parties to talk about a family time schedule that will benefit the child.

According to the Oregon Department of Human Services, when there is positive contact between birth and foster parents, studies show children:

- Have more stable placements;
- Experience better emotional development;
- Are more successful in school; and
- Return home sooner.

Benefits of shared parenting meetings

For the child:

- Provides a continuum of care;
- Enables the transition to be as smooth and short as possible;
- Decreases the child's ability to split the adults; and
- Ensures the child is free to love and be loved by both the parents and foster family.

For the Parents:

- Empowers them to be active participants in their child's transition into foster care;
- Helps them feel more at ease with the foster parent;
- Gives them the opportunity to meet the family who will be caring for their child and to feel more confident about their child's safety and well-being;
- Offers the potential for a supportive, mentoring relationship with the foster parents; and
- Allows the potential for long-term support from the foster parents.

For the Foster Parents:

- Helps the foster parents to feel more at ease with the parents and to experience them as real people, not just parents who had their child removed; and
- Increases the likelihood that the foster parents will support the reunification plan.

Support family time

Family time is one of the primary tools social workers and caregivers use to help children cope with the separation and loss associated with out-of-home placement and the trauma associated with maltreatment.

Research has found frequent, supported family time is strongly associated with successful family reunification and decreased length of stay in out-of-home placement. Research also shows that children who are visited frequently are more likely to have high well-being ratings and to adjust well to placement.

Possible reactions to family time

What children may experience:

Family time often brings up conflicting feelings, which may lead to problem behaviors—before and after family time. Unless these disturbances are extreme, they should not affect family time. If a child in your care is having a difficult time related to family time and you need support, contact your resource coordinator or social worker.

What parents may experience:

- Confusion, anger, desperation, withdrawal;
- Feelings of incompetency, inadequacy, inferiority, shame;
- Feeling judged and pressured to perform to often unknown expectations; and
- Relapse (substance abusing parents have been known to relapse following family time as a means of numbing the pain).

It's important to understand that a parent's reaction to family time (e.g., disinterest, hostility, cancelling at the last minute) may be the manifestation of grief and loss.

What you may experience:

- Pleased when the child and parents have a great time;
- Confused about the expectations established by DCF and the child's response;
- Concerned, especially if the child has a negative response to a parent;
- Mixed feelings about the parent(s);
- Resentful or helpless at the demands placed on you by family time, particularly if visits are daily (often in the case of an infant) or family time increases;
- Caught in the middle when family time disrupts other "normal" activities for the child, like naps, meals, and other planned activities;
- Annoyed or even angry at abrupt schedule changes or miscommunications; and
- That the child's behavior or family's situation triggers your own trauma.

Please make sure to get support for yourself if you need it. Remember, these are normal feelings experienced by many foster parents.

When first in your care	At first family time	After family time	Returning to your home
The child might feel...			
shocked, angry, afraid, depressed	happy, relieved, sad, angry, afraid, confused	confused, afraid, sad, relieved, angry, anxious	resentful, sad, angry, depressed, relieved, happy, guilty
The child might be...			
listless, withdrawn, distracted, hostile, aggressive, tearful, inconsolable	hyperactive, hostile, aggressive, talkative, silent, cowering, avoiding the parent, clingy with parent or other adult	tearful, hostile, belligerent, whiny, leaving without saying goodbye, clingy, pleading	hyperactive, hostile, aggressive, talkative, silent, clingy, tearful, not eating, not sleeping, bed wetting or other regressive behaviors

Supporting family time

You play a critical role in the success of family time and in maintaining connections between the child in your care and the people who are important to the child.

We may ask you to transport the child to family time, which could take place in:

- The parent's home;
- Your home (if you and the social worker agree this is appropriate);
- A public place mutually agreed on and approved by the social worker; or
- A Family Services or other professional office if there are any concerns about safety.

If both you and the child's social worker feel comfortable and agree it is appropriate, you could be the one coaching family time—in person, by phone, or via mail or email.

If you do coach family time, you will be provided instruction and guidance. Topics that may be addressed include:

1. Providing parent education (e.g., how to hold an infant, age-appropriate games, and appropriate snacks).
2. Maintaining boundaries and safety as instructed by the social worker. For example, if the child is not to be alone with the parent, you would take the child to the restroom if the need arises, leaving the parent in the common area.
3. Intervening if the parent-child contact is concerning (i.e., parent whispers secretively to the child or provides candy to a child with diabetes).
4. Observing the interaction between parent and child and sharing with the parents and social worker afterwards. How are they interacting? What is the parent doing that demonstrates parenting skills? How is the child responding to the parent's behavior/ words? What emotions are present for both parent and child?

Parents and foster parents who are trained to understand and address a child's reactions can turn distress and mixed feelings into growth experiences. Frequent and positive communication between the parents and foster parents will make discussing the child's reactions and focusing on the child's needs easier and more productive.

For older children, clear expectations and consistent explanations, inclusion in planning and debriefing, and opportunities for expression both inside and outside of family time will maximize the impact of family time.

For more information about family time, ask the social worker or resource coordinator for a copy of the *Family Time Guidelines*.

WORKING WITH DCF

A strong working relationship between the department and foster/kinship foster parents is critical to the work that we do. While we are legally responsible for making decisions about the case plans for children and families, foster parents provide day-to-day care and nurturing. Working together, we support families so parents can resume the safe care of their children and if that is not possible, we work to achieve permanency for children and youth.

This partnership works best when it's founded on mutual respect, excellent communication, and an understanding of each other's role. To help you understand our role, this section describes some of the services we provide, staff and contracted professionals you may work with, and the case planning process.

Services to children and families

Child safety interventions

The Child Protection Line takes calls about suspected child abuse and neglect. A supervisor determines whether to accept a report for intervention. If the supervisor accepts a report, a social worker is assigned the appropriate child safety intervention (*investigation* or *assessment*), depending on the nature of the allegation.

Services to at-risk families

During a child safety intervention, a social worker assesses the safety of, and risk to, the child. If the assessed risk is high, the worker opens a case and develops a plan to address the identified risks. When we can do so safely, we keep children with their families and provide community-based, family-centered services and supports.

Services to children in state care and their families

When out-of-home care is needed, the child is placed in another setting, most often in a licensed foster or kinship foster home. The social worker works with the parents and the family's team on a plan for a safe, permanent home for the child, ideally with the parents. The social worker arranges for and coordinates needed supports and services, sets expectations, and assesses progress.

Supervision of youth on juvenile probation

Many youth who have committed delinquent acts are on probation. A social worker monitors the youth's progress towards achieving the terms of his/her probation.

Crisis & After-Hours Services

The Emergency Services Program (ESP) is staffed by DCF social workers who are available by phone after hours, on weekends, and on state holidays. ESP staff can help you solve problems and resolve emergencies when district offices are closed. The phone number is 1-800-649-5285.

Staff and other professionals you may work with

Assessment/Investigative Social Workers

These workers conduct investigations or assessments in response to reports accepted for intervention. Workers in the Special Investigation Unit investigate reports of suspected child abuse/neglect in all facilities regulated by the department, including foster homes.

Child's Attorney

Attorneys who represent the children in court; every child in the state's care has one.

District Director

District directors oversee the 12 Family Services district offices. They are available to support foster families when social workers and supervisors are not available.

Family Group Conference Coordinator or Convener

Contracted professionals who plan and prepare participants for Family Group Conferences — a process by which the child's family members convene to make a plan for the child.

Family Safety Planning Facilitator

Family Services staff or contracted professionals who facilitate Family Safety Planning Meetings — a structured meeting that supports honest communication with the family about safety issues, including both risk and protective factors. Foster parents are often invited.

Family Time Coach

Contracted providers who support and coach parents visiting their children in foster care.

Guardian ad Litem (GAL)

Volunteers appointed by the court who meet with children, attend all court hearings, and advocate in court for what they believe is in the children's best interests.

Licensing Social Worker

Social workers who license foster homes, residential facilities, child-placing agencies, adoption agencies, and shelter programs throughout the state. They also investigate possible licensing violations in foster homes, renew licenses, and evaluate changes in foster homes.

Permanency Planning Counselor

Contracted professionals who help Family Services find adoptive homes, prepare children and families for adoption, and finalize the adoptions.

Resource Coordinator

Resource coordinators recruit foster parents, screen applicants, match children with licensed foster parents, and support foster families in their districts. They also maintain all foster family records and make sure reimbursement arrangements are made.

Social Worker

Social workers are assigned to families who receive services from the department and children who are in the state's care and their families. They help families and children get needed services, make sure children are safe, and when children are placed out of home, they work with the team towards the case plan goal.

Supervisor

Family Services supervisors oversee social workers and are available to foster parents when social workers are not available.

Youth Development Coordinator

Coordinators prepare youth in the state's care (ages 15 – 21) to live independently, teaching them life skills and providing them with the information, training, support, and services they need to successfully transition from foster care to living on their own.

The case planning process

The process of working with the family and service providers to achieve **the goal of a safe and permanent home for the child** is called *case planning*.

The family's team, which you will be a critical part of, works together to develop a case plan that outlines:

- Why the child came into DCF custody;
- The family's goals, challenges, strengths, and support system;
- What changes the parents, child, or both need to make;
- What supports and services the child and parents need from DCF and other service providers to help them make the needed changes; and
- The goal of the case plan (the initial case plan goal is typically reunification).

Once the case plan is developed, the team focuses on implementing the plan, monitoring the progress made, and making any needed adjustments. The plan changes as the situation changes. After six months, the social worker invites team members to a meeting to review the case plan, assess progress, set expectations, and share information. An independent person (called a *case reviewer*) facilitates the review meeting to make sure everyone gets a chance to be heard. At the end of the review, participants are asked to sign the case plan indicating their agreement. If you disagree with the case plan, the appeal process to handle such disagreements will be explained at the review.

When sufficient progress has been made, DCF may recommend that the child return home and the case be closed; however, if it becomes clear that the child cannot return home, the goal may be changed to looking for another permanent home for the child. As the child's foster parent, you may be asked to consider providing that home.

What you can expect from DCF

The partnership between DCF and foster parents works best when everyone understands what is expected.

You can expect to:

- ☐ Be respected as a valued and integral part of the family's team.
- ☐ Receive a completed placement check list for each child placed in your home. (See Policy 94: <http://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/policies>).
- ☐ Receive timely communication from the social worker. Get answers to routine questions within 72 hours. When the social worker is not available to respond to an urgent matter, contact the social worker's supervisor or another team member.
- ☐ Review the case record of a child placed in your home, after signing a confidentiality agreement. (See Policy 94: <http://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/policies>).
- ☐ Have the opportunity to provide input on the development of the case plan.
- ☐ Be invited to attend and participate in case plan reviews. (See Policy 122: <http://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/policies>).
- ☐ Have an opportunity to talk about any concerns DCF has about the care of a child in your home.
- ☐ Receive notice 2 weeks in advance of a planned move for the child living with you, unless DCF has a concern regarding the immediate health or safety of the child. If the child has been living with you for more than 3 months, you are entitled to a formal review of a planned or unplanned placement change. This includes circumstances in which the child has been recently removed from your home. There are some exceptions. (See Policy 94: <http://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/policies>).
- ☐ Receive written or verbal notice from DCF of any post-disposition court hearing regarding the child. You have a right to be heard at the hearing. The court will exercise discretion regarding your presence at the entire hearing. (See Policy 94: <http://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/policies>).

What DCF expects from you

The working partnership between DCF and foster parents is successful when everyone understands what is expected.

We expect you to:

- ☐ Provide the child with a safe, stable place to live.
- ☐ Complete the *Foundations for Kinship, Foster and Adoptive Families Training*.
- ☐ Make sure the child is taken to health care appointments as needed.
- ☐ Work with the school on the child's behalf.
- ☐ Participate as engaged members of the family's team.
- ☐ Attend and participate in shared parenting meetings when a child is placed in your home.
- ☐ Communicate regularly with DCF about the child's progress and any challenges you are experiencing.
- ☐ Work actively to support the case plan goals and the plan for family contact. If you disagree with aspects of the case plan, request a meeting to discuss your concerns.
- ☐ Comply with all regulations listed in the *Licensing Regulations For Foster Care* guide (<http://dcf.vermont.gov/publications>).
- ☐ Complete all training requirements for foster and kin foster parents (See Policy 93 at: <http://dcf.vt.gov/fsd/policies>).
- ☐ Give the department at least two weeks notice if you are requesting that a child leave your home, unless safety is a concern.
- ☐ Notify DCF immediately if the child has a serious or emergency medical need, has run away, been in an accident, is abused or has disclosed past abuse, is involved in illegal activity, or any other unusual event occurs. After hours, notify Emergency Services at 1-800-649-5285.
- ☐ Request permission to travel overnight outside of the state of Vermont with a child in foster care.
- ☐ Schedule routine medical, dental, and counseling appointments for the child with providers approved by the child's social worker. Cooperate in arrangements for any other special services needed by the child.
- ☐ Get prior approval before leaving a child in a respite provider's care. All respite providers must be approved by DCF. (See Policy 95 at: <http://dcf.vt.gov/fsd/policies>).

Who to call if you...

Question	Resource Coordinator	Social Worker	School	Therapist	Doctor
Want to cut a child's hair		X			
Need information about childcare	X	X			
Want to sign a child up for afterschool activities		X	X		
Need information about additional supports at school		X	X		
Are being investigated for child abuse/neglect and want to speak to someone	X	X			
Need to know where to send your expense forms	X				
Want to find out about court dates		X			
Are struggling with a child in your home	X	X		X	
Are going on vacation, out of state or out of country	X	X			
Want to know more about a child's likes, dislikes, and routine	X	X			
Have questions about a child's special educational needs		X	X		
Need to seek medical / emergency medical care for a child in your care		X*			X
Have questions about a child's health needs, including medications		X			
Need to report a child has run away		X*			

*** After hours, on weekends, and on State holidays, call the Emergency Services Program at 1-800-649-5285.**

UNDERSTANDING THE COURT PROCESS

Children and youth come to the attention of Family Court when the state alleges they were abused or neglected, without or beyond their parents' control, chronically truant from school, or committed a delinquent act. While DCF makes recommendations to the court, only law enforcement officers may remove children from their homes and only family court judges may grant custody to someone other than the parent.

If a judge decides the child/youth cannot safely remain at home with the parent at that point in time, he or she will consider granting legal custody to someone else in the following order:

1. A non-custodial parent;
2. A close relative;
3. Another relative or person with a connection to the child/family; or
4. The DCF Commissioner.

If the judge grants legal custody of a child to the DCF Commissioner, Family Services decides where the child will live — with an emphasis on placing the child with relatives or someone else familiar to the child. By placing the child with you, DCF relies on you to provide day-to-day care for the child; however, DCF is still the child's legal custodian. That's why the social worker has the authority to decide where the child will live and must be involved in all major decisions concerning the child (e.g., authorizing surgery, consenting to out-of-state travel, and allowing a teen to get a tattoo or body piercing).

Court hearings that may occur

There are usually three or more Family Court hearings for a child who has come to the attention of the court, including a Preliminary Hearing or Temporary Care Hearing; Merits Hearing (adjudication); and Disposition Hearing. Additional hearings may also occur.

Emergency care hearing

In emergencies (e.g., a child is in immediate danger, has run away, or has been arrested), Vermont law authorizes law enforcement to take a child into physical custody and contact the local state's attorney. If the emergency occurs after hours, the state's attorney or police officer contacts a judge by phone to request an Emergency Care Order. If the judge agrees the child's immediate welfare requires temporary state care, a court order will place the child in state care. The order may also allow the child to stay home under court-ordered conditions necessary to safeguard the child's safety. Any order for emergency care must be followed by a court hearing within 72 hours.

Preliminary hearing (non-emergency CHINS & delinquency cases)

In non-emergency cases, the court will hold a Preliminary Hearing within 15 days of a case being filed in Family Court. The court will review the information presented in the petition and affidavit and hear from the parties. In emergency matters, the temporary care hearing is the preliminary hearing (see description of *temporary care hearing* next).

Temporary care hearing

The Family Court will hold a Temporary Care Hearing within 72 hours of the Emergency Care Order to determine whether the child can return home or should remain in the temporary care of DCF or another person. At that hearing, the judge will ask the parents, Family Services social worker, State's Attorney, child's attorney, and child's court appointed Guardian ad Litem for their opinions. The judge may want to hear from the child as well. Children over ten years old are expected to be at court for this hearing. The child's attorney may ask the court to waive the child's presence for good reason.

Merits hearing & adjudication

The Merits Hearing is the "trial" part of the case, held within 60 days of the Temporary Care Order. The case is presented to a judge without a jury. The allegations presented by the State's Attorney must be proven by a preponderance of the evidence. Witnesses are called and testimony under oath is taken. Testimony may be presented by family members, teachers, doctors, mental health providers, friends, witnesses, police officers, social workers, foster parents, and the child.

After listening to the evidence, the judge will make a decision. At, or soon after the conclusion of, the Merits Hearing, the judge may issue the following findings:

- CHINS A – The child has been abandoned or abused by his/her parents, guardian, or other custodian.
- CHINS B – The child is without proper parental care or subsistence, education, medical, or other care necessary for his/her well-being.
- CHINS C – The child is without or beyond the control of his/her parents, guardian, or other custodian.
- CHINS D – The child is habitually and without justification truant from compulsory school attendance.
- Delinquency – A child over the age of ten has been found guilty of a crime.

If the judge finds the child in need of care or supervision (CHINS) or delinquent, the judge will order Family Services to prepare a disposition case plan. If the judge finds the allegations by Family Services and the State's Attorney have not been established, the judge will dismiss the petition and vacate any temporary orders issued in the case.

Citation hearing

If a child or youth is charged with a delinquent act but not brought into the state's care, the court process begins with law enforcement issuing a citation for the youth to appear in court.

Motion hearing

A motion hearing is for the judge to decide on a request to compel certain actions, suppress certain evidence, create protective orders, or invoke certain statutory protections of minors. A motion hearing may occur at any point. Evidence and testimony may be presented by any party. A judge will rule on the motion and the ruling can be appealed.

Disposition hearing

A Disposition Hearing is held within 35 days of the Merits Order. In preparation for this hearing, the social worker prepares a disposition case plan. This plan identifies a permanency goal for the child, an estimated date for achieving the goal, and a plan for services. The Family Services recommendations may be contested by any of the parties involved in the hearing, including the parents' attorneys, the child's attorney, or the Guardian ad Litem. The judge will accept or reject the plan, based on whether it adequately supports the permanency goal. The judge will also make a decision about custody of the child at this time.

Post-dispositional review hearing

The court is required to hold a hearing 60 days after the Disposition Order is issued to monitor progress of the case plan. By law, foster parents have the right to be heard at this hearing and any hearing thereafter. The judge may ask questions. The foster parents may wish to prepare some notes to help them prepare for court.

Permanency hearing

The permanency hearing occurs within 12 months of a child's entering the state's care but may be held earlier for children under six. The purpose of this hearing is to determine the permanency goal for the child and provide an estimated time for achieving that goal.

Status conference

This is a hearing to inform the judge what is going on with the case. It provides all parties an opportunity to update the judge on progress.

Other things to know about court hearings

People with party status

"People with party status" are those determined by the court to be proper or necessary to the court proceedings. People with party status have the right to present evidence and call witnesses. The following people are always parties to the case:

- The judge;
- The State's Attorney (an attorney who represents the state);
- The Family Services social worker;
- The child's Guardian ad Litem; and
- The parents, children, and their attorneys.

The judge may also grant party status to others.

Foster parents have a statutorily provided opportunity to be heard at Post-Disposition Review Hearings as well as at Permanency Hearings.

Notice of hearings

All parties to a juvenile case are given advance notice of hearings. The notice is usually provided in writing, sent by mail to the lawyers and any party who does not have a lawyer. Occasionally, a notice of a hearing may be given in person or by phone.

Foster parents are notified, in writing or verbally, of post-disposition hearings and permanency hearings. It is customary for the social worker to notify foster parents of other hearings as well. Always let your social worker and the court know how to contact you if your phone number or address changes.

Continuances

Any party may request in writing that a court hearing be continued to another date if they cannot attend the scheduled hearing. Continuances are only granted by the judge for reasons such as illness or the inability of a party to be present. When a hearing is continued, all parties and foster parents are given notice (in writing if there is enough time) of the change in date.

Courtroom guidelines

All persons are expected to be respectful of each other and the judge. Here are some pointers to help you have a good experience in court.

- It's a good idea to arrive 15 minutes early for all hearings. Security is as tight if not tighter than screening to board a plane.
- Remember that you will have to pass through a metal detector to enter the courthouse. Purses and bags will be screened. Leave items such as pocket knives at home.
- Once you've arrived at the designated court room, ask the court clerk to put your name on the list requesting entry into the court room.
- Do not interrupt, even if you strongly disagree with something being said. The judge will provide an opportunity for all involved in the case to be heard.
- Be aware of your body language and behavior, even when simply observing. The judge will notice.
- Strive for a neutral and respectful demeanor while at court.
- Let the judge know (raise your hand,) if you cannot hear what the others are saying in the courtroom.
- Get support if you need it. Court can be a stressful experience. If you need support, talk with someone (e.g., the resource coordinator, social worker, or another foster parent).

RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO YOU

Financial support

Monthly stipend

Foster parents receive a monthly stipend to help with the costs of raising a child. Payment is sent by mail or, preferably, directly deposited into your bank account around the middle of each month (for the previous month's care). Payment includes an allowance for room and board as well as money specifically targeted for the child or youth to use for clothing, incidentals (e.g., shampoo, school supplies, cosmetics, etc.) and personal spending. The child or youth should be given responsibility for managing these amounts as appropriate. Reimbursement rates vary depending on the training and experience of the foster parents and age of the children in their care.

Occasionally, supplemental reimbursement may be authorized when the caregiver is expected to provide a greater level of care to meet the child's need for additional care and supervision. For further information, please refer to Policy 93 at <http://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/policies>

The IRS considers the monthly stipend foster parents receive as reimbursement of expenses and non-taxable income. Reimbursement for respite care, however, may be taxed. For more information about the tax implications, ask your accountant. See page 35 for information on respite care.

Case plan expenses

In addition to the monthly stipend, you may request reimbursement for expenses related to carrying out the case plan. This could include, for example, making approved phone calls, attending training, and transporting the child to family time, meetings, court, and other activities outlined in the child's case plan. You must get approval for these expenses first and submit completed expense forms monthly. To avoid delays be sure each form is complete and the totals are correct.

Transportation to medical appointments, including counseling, eye care, and dental care, can be arranged for and reimbursed through Medicaid transportation. Please note that each district has a different process. If you will be transporting a child in your care to a medical appointment, please call the social worker or resource coordinator in your district.

Clothing vouchers

An initial clothing voucher of up to \$100 may be issued if a child comes into care without adequate clothing and efforts to recover the child's clothing are unsuccessful.

Damage claims

If the child damages your home accidentally or on purpose, you may be eligible to be reimbursed for the costs of repairing the damage. Contact your social worker or resource coordinator as soon as possible after the damage has occurred, and they will explain the process. (For more information, refer to Policy 268 at <http://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/policies>).

Hot lunch & WIC

Children in care are eligible for free school lunches. Children under the age of five are also eligible to receive services and food from the Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) program administered by the Health Department, regardless of your family's income.

Unusual expenses and special events

If a child needs special items or has unusual expenses, there may be funds available to help. Some organizations help with things like camp, class trips, and other special events. Ask the social worker for more information. Requests for reimbursement of unusual expenses must have prior approval.

Training support

Training helps caregivers deal with the complex issues faced by children and families who are involved with DCF. Everyone who fosters a child in state custody is required to take the *Foundations for Kinship, Foster and Adoptive Families Training*. In addition, foster parents have access to a wide variety of other training opportunities.

The Child Welfare Training Partnership (CWTP)

The CWTP provides the *Foundations for Kinship, Foster and Adoptive Families Training*. Information about this training is available through your Resource Coordinator. The CWTP also provides training for families preparing for adoption: *Fostering to Forever*. Starting September 1, 2014, all families adopting children in DCF custody will be required to complete this one-session training before the adoptions are finalized.

Your resource coordinator can tell you when the next classes are scheduled. The CWTP can also work with your local district office to develop specific trainings, as needed.

The CWTP also maintains *Voices at the Table*— a dynamic blog and website that includes personal stories; parenting resources; training and support materials; and a bi-weekly blog for kinship, foster, and adoptive families in Vermont. <http://voicesatthetable.wordpress.com>

DCF workshops

DCF provides workshops for staff throughout the year. Foster parents are welcome to attend these workshops for free, as space allows. Ask your resource coordinator for a calendar of workshops, which cover a range of topics and are held during regular work hours.

Conferences

Vermont Kin as Parents (VKAP), the Vermont Foster and Adoptive Family Association (VFafa), and the Vermont Adoption Consortium each sponsor an annual conference for caregivers. Information on these conferences can be found on their respective websites:

- <http://vermontkinasparents.org>
- <http://www.vfafa.org>
- <http://www.vtadoption.org>

Other supports

Childcare

Subsidized childcare is available if you work outside the home or it's authorized because of the child's special needs. Protective services childcare is provided for some children. The child's social worker can authorize this service if he or she feels the child's situation calls for it.

Contracted support services: case management

DCF works with several agencies that provide a limited amount of additional support to foster parents, including case management. Case managers may be available to come to your home to consult with you about child-specific behaviors and ways to manage them. Ask the social worker or resource coordinator about services available to you.

Family Services District Offices

Your local district office, including the resource coordinator, social worker, supervisor, and district director are available to provide ongoing support.

Medical benefits

Children in state care are covered for medical expenses either through their parents' insurance or Medicaid.

Respite care

DCF supports the use of respite as a positive break for caregivers. Respite gives you some time to relax and refresh your energy. Respite is also an opportunity for the child to have a break and connect with a supportive network of other caring adults. Ideally, respite is developed with the youth and family and becomes part of the case plan. Using natural supports and extended family whenever possible builds connections for the child and maximizes normalcy for the youth. For more information, see *FSD Policy 95* at <http://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/policies>.

Urgent care

If you have a situation that requires immediate attention, call the FSD district office during regular office hours. If you are involved with a support agency, contact them. After hours, on weekends, and on state holidays, call the Emergency Services Program (ESP) at 1-800-649-5285.

Economic Benefits

DCF's Economic Services Division administers several programs that help families meet their basic needs. Eligibility for most programs is based on family or household income as well as on additional criteria. Foster care payments are not counted as income for most programs; however, some programs (e.g., Fuel Assistance and 3SquaresVT) will count foster care payments as income *if you choose* to include the foster child as part of your household.

If you need help meeting your family's basic needs, call 1-800-479-6151 or go to <http://mybenefits.vt.gov> to find out more.

Extended Care for Youth

If a young person turns 18 while in your care, there may be an opportunity for the youth to continue being supported in your home until their 22nd birthday.

Financial support is available through the Youth Development Program as long as the youth:

1. Has a signed *Voluntary Services Agreement*; and
2. Continues working toward the goals set out in the agreement.

The *Voluntary Services Agreement* — signed by you, the youth, and a social worker or youth development coordinator — outlines:

- a. The youth's goals;
- b. The youth's commitment to continuing education, employment, and other productive use of time;
- c. Any agreement about the youth's financial contribution to his or her living expenses; and
- d. How adults will support the youth's goals and help him/her achieve self-sufficiency. Your role will include helping the youth attain the competencies and life skills he or she needs to thrive and transition into healthy, productive, and self-sufficient adulthood.

The Youth Development Program is a community-based program supported by DCF to help youth successfully transition into adulthood. Services and supports include housing assistance, case management, help finding a job, help securing health insurance, and more.

For More Information

- Call the Youth Development Program Director at (802) 229-9151;
- Contact your local Youth Development Coordinator (see list on our website at http://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/ydc/contact_us/coordinators); and
- Read *Bulletin 08-1 -Transition Age Youth*. Ask your local coordinator for a copy or read it at <http://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/mous#Rules>

THE ULTIMATE GOAL: PERMANENCE

The first hope for children and youth in state custody is safe and timely reunification with their parents. When this cannot happen, the state must pursue other options for achieving permanence for the children and youth in its care. *Permanence means not only an emotional and verbal commitment to the child, but also a legal one.*

Options for Achieving Permanence

1. *Adoption by a relative, family friend, or a non-related family*

In Vermont, adoptions take place in probate court. But before an adoption can take place, either a) the parents must “voluntarily relinquish” their parental rights or b) the courts must “terminate their parental rights”.

When you adopt a child, you become his or her legal parent with all the rights and responsibilities that entails. Once the adoption is finalized, the birth parents no longer have any legal rights to, or responsibilities for, the child.

Having some form of post-adoption contact with birth family members, however, may be beneficial for both you and the child. This can include the exchange of letters and photographs, phone calls, and visits. Explore your options with the social worker or permanency planning counselor. Post-adoption contact with birth parents, siblings, and other birth family members can be coordinated through DCF’s Adoption Registry.

Adoption Assistance

If you adopt a child who has special needs AND is in DCF custody at the time of the adoption, you may qualify for *Adoption Assistance*. This may include a monthly stipend, medical benefits, and payment for special services.

To find out more, please call DCF’s Adoption Unit at (802) 769-6282.

2. *Permanent guardianship with a relative or family friend*

A “permanent guardianship” is a legal relationship, created in Family Court, between a child and relative or family friend. Before a permanent guardianship can be established, the judge must find by clear and convincing evidence that:

- a. The child is not likely to return home to the parents or be adopted within a reasonable period of time;
- b. The child is at least 12 years old — unless the proposed guardian is a relative or permanent guardian for one of the child’s siblings;
- c. The child has lived with the proposed guardian for at least a year (six months if the proposed guardian is a relative);
- d. The proposed guardian is suitable;
- e. The proposed guardian is able and willing to provide a safe, nurturing home for the child until he or she turns 18; and
- f. Permanent guardianship is in the child’s best interests.

In a permanent guardianship, DCF is no longer involved; the guardian is responsible for the child's day-to-day care, protection, and education; and the parents retain certain parental rights and responsibilities (e.g., the right to have contact with the child and the responsibility to pay child support). Permanent guardianship provides children with a sense of permanency and home, while allowing them to stay connected — to family, tradition, culture, and community.

Permanent Guardianship Assistance

Relatives and family friends who are granted permanent guardianship of children in DCF custody AND meet other requirements might be eligible for *Permanent Guardianship Assistance*. This may include a monthly stipend, Medicaid for the child, and reimbursement of non-recurring expenses. For more information about eligibility for assistance, call DCF's Adoption Unit at (802) 769-6282.

A child's transition to another home

When a child leaves your home to reunify with his or her parents, join relatives, or transition into an adoptive home, you will work with the social worker to make sure the transition goes as smoothly as possible. Collaboration is vital. Sharing detailed information about the child's strengths, areas for growth, and daily routines will help make the adjustment easier. Helping the child to express his/her feelings about the move can also help.

It is of utmost importance to provide the child with a planned and organized transition. The time can be used to recognize positive change and celebrate a new beginning. Many foster parents help mark the occasion by planning a favorite meal, holding a good-bye celebration, or giving the child special mementos to help provide closure. It is important for children to learn how to say "good-bye" in a positive way.

Having a child leave your home can be both rewarding and painful. After the child leaves, it is helpful to schedule a meeting with the social worker or resource coordinator to discuss how the placement went and share what you've learned that will help you in the future.

Some final words

We hope this guide has helped you learn more about DCF and how you can help a child in the care and custody of the state. If you have further questions, please contact the child's social worker or local resource coordinator.

More detailed information on the topics covered in this guide can be found in the *Foundations Classroom and Resource Guide* you received as part of the Foundations training. If you don't have a copy, ask your resource coordinator. If you want to learn more about Vermont's child protection system, read *A Parent's Guide To Vermont's Child Welfare & Youth Justice Agency* (<http://dcf.vermont.gov/publications>).

You can also access other resources online (e.g., forms, fact sheets, newsletters, guides, and links to support groups) at <http://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/resources/foster>.

Essential Phone Numbers

	Name	Phone
Social Worker:	<hr/>	<hr/>
Supervisor:	<hr/>	<hr/>
Resource Coordinator:	<hr/>	<hr/>
Parent/Guardian:	<hr/>	<hr/>
Parent/Guardian:	<hr/>	<hr/>
School Contact:	<hr/>	<hr/>
Childcare Provider:	<hr/>	<hr/>
Therapist:	<hr/>	<hr/>
Physician:	<hr/>	<hr/>
Dentist:	<hr/>	<hr/>
Educational Surrogate:	<hr/>	<hr/>
Attorney:	<hr/>	<hr/>
Guardian ad Litem:	<hr/>	<hr/>
Other:	<hr/>	<hr/>
Other:	<hr/>	<hr/>

Emergency Numbers

DCF Emergency Services Program (after office hours): 1-800-649-5285

Local Police:	<hr/>
Local Crisis Program:	<hr/>
Other:	<hr/>

Vermont Foster and Adoptive Family Association

VFAFA is a statewide network of foster and adoptive parents who work to empower and support foster and adoptive families. VFAFA educates through its newsletter and annual conference; informs Family Services on policy and practice issues; provides legislative advocacy; and maintains the VT Resource Families Listserv.

<http://www.vfafa.org> • <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/vtresourcefamilies>

Vermont Kin as Parents

VKAP offers free information & referral service to kinship caregivers. They can help you:

- Find programs, services, educational opportunities, and other resources;
- Figure out the right questions to ask so you can make informed decisions; and
- Connect with kinship caregivers and support groups throughout Vermont.

(802) 871-5104 • <http://vermontkinasparents.org>

Vermont Adoption Consortium

A consortium of agencies and groups around the state that offer support to guardians and adoptive parents. Supports include trauma and adoption informed parenting education, information and referral, assistance with school and community issues, and support and discussion groups.

(802) 585-9833 • <http://www.vtadoption.org>

Voices at the Table Blog & Website

A bi-weekly blog for Vermont kinship, foster, and adoptive families to share with one another. The website includes information about resources, support, educational opportunities, and topics relevant to your experience.

<http://voicesatthetable.wordpress.com>